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UNCLAS RANGOON 000549

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL MOPS BM

SUBJECT: 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF "SIAM-BURMA DEATH RAILWAY"

COMMEMORATED

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: COM, DATT, and others participated in a May 1 Australia-organized ceremony commemorating the 60th anniversary of the infamous Siam-Burma Death Railway. 133 Americas were among the estimated 12,000 Allied POWs who perishing while slaving on the railway's construction. This was the first time the GOB has permitted the C-12 out of Bangkok to fly from Rangoon to Moulmein (Mawlamyine). The usual high-profile presence of Military Intelligence minders was largely absent during this trip and the GOB did not attempt to place a "safety officer" on board the C-12. Perhaps the GOB's lighter touch on this trip was an outgrowth of the successful, confidence-building WWII remains recovery mission concluded last month. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Four surviving Australian POWs were among the 60 or so mostly Australian civilians who traveled to Thanbyuzarat, the Burma terminus of the railway constructed with forced POW and "native" labor in WWII. The COM joined the Australian and British ambassadors for a short service at the cemetery, at which former POW Dr. Rowley Richards was the keynote speaker. The surviving POWs were the event's center of focus and willingly shared their memories and experiences. Dr. Richards recounted that, while en route to a POW camp in Japan after the completion of the railway, his ship was torpedoed by a U.S. submarine. He was fished out of the ocean by a lifeboat and arrived in Japan just prior to the nuclear attacks. As a prison doctor he undoubtedly saved many American lives, commenting, "On my rounds I used to linger longer than I should have with the Americans, as I was fascinated by the accents of your chaps from the Bronx."

¶3. (SBU) This was the first time the GOB has permitted the C-12 out of Bangkok to fly from Rangoon to Moulmein (Mawlamyine). Flying on the C-12 saved the Embassy group a 15-hour round-trip drive over dangerous roads. Situated 100 miles and a 35-minute flight southeast of Rangoon, Moulmein is Burma's fourth largest city and a former capital of British Lower Burma. Airport formalities were non-existent in Moulmein and apart from a slightly delayed takeoff (caused by a dog napping on the tarmac), the flights were without incident. The blacktop road running 40 miles south from Moulmein to Thanbyuzarat winds through miles of rubber plantations; although in past years the area has been plagued by insurgency, the road featured only one security checkpoint. Embassy Rangoon extends its thanks to Embassy Bangkok, particularly to the DAO and C-12 crew, for the generous use of the aircraft.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: We noted that the normal high-profile presence of Military Intelligence minders was largely absent during this trip. Further, the GOB did not attempt to place a "safety officer" on board the C-12 this time. This was also the first year the GOB permitted the Australian embassy to host a formal ceremony at Thanbyuzarat. Perhaps the GOB's lighter touch on this trip was an outgrowth of the successful, confidence-building WWII remains recovery mission concluded last month. End Comment. MARTINEZ